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National Institute on Aging

# Age Page

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## Who's Who in Health Care

In many cases, the family doctor is no longer the sole provider of medical care and advice for older Americans. Often, the elderly are treated by a number of health professionals, including doctors, nurses, and therapists. With this variety of health providers, it is important to understand which professionals can offer the best and least costly care for a specific problem and which services normally will be paid for by Medicare. The following definitions cover some, but not all, of the medical practitioners frequently seen by older people.

### General Care

***Doctors of medicine (M.D.)*** use all accepted methods of medical care. They treat diseases and injuries, provide preventive care, do routine checkups, prescribe drugs, and do some surgery. M.D.'s complete medical school plus 3 to 7 years of graduate medical education. They must be licensed by the state in which they practice.

***Internists (M.D.)*** are M.D.'s who specialize in the diagnosis and medical treatment of diseases in adults. Internists do not perform surgery or deliver babies.

***Family practitioners (M.D.)*** are M.D.'s who specialize in providing comprehensive health care for all members of a family, regardless of age or sex, on a continuing basis.

***Doctors of osteopathic medicine (D.O.)*** provide general health care to individuals and families. The training they receive is similar to that of an M.D. In addition to drugs, surgery, and other treatments, a D.O. may manipulate muscles and bones to treat specific problems.

The above doctors might refer patients to a number of medical specialists including:

- Cardiologist—a heart specialist.
- Dermatologist—a skin specialist.
- Endocrinologist—a specialist in disorders of the glands of internal secretion, such as diabetes.
- Gastroenterologist—a specialist in diseases of the digestive tract.
- Gynecologist—a specialist in the female reproductive system.
- Neurologist—a specialist in disorders of the nervous system.
- Oncologist—a specialist in tumors and cancer.
- Ophthalmologist—an eye specialist.
- Rheumatologist—a specialist in arthritis and rheumatism.
- Urologist—a specialist in the urinary system, including the bladder and kidneys in both sexes and the male reproductive system.

Most of the services of M.D.'s, specialists who have M.D. degrees, and D.O.'s normally are covered by Medicare.

***Physician assistants (P.A.)*** are most often seen in doctors' offices or hospitals doing some of the tasks traditionally performed by doctors. They do physical examinations, take medical histories, carry out diagnostic tests, and develop treatment plans for patients. Their education includes 2 to 4 years of college followed by a 2-year period of specialized training. P.A.'s must always be

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under the supervision of a doctor but, depending on state laws, the supervision can be by telephone rather than in person. In some states P.A.'s can prescribe certain drugs. Medicare will only pay for the services provided by a P.A. if they are performed in a hospital or doctor's office under the supervision of a doctor.

***Nurse practitioners (R.N., N.P.)*** are registered nurses with training beyond basic nursing education. Nurse practitioners perform physical examinations and diagnostic tests, counsel patients, and develop treatment programs. Regulations regarding their duties vary from state to state. Nurse practitioners may work independently, such as in rural clinics, or may be staff members at hospitals and other health facilities. Medicare will help pay for services performed under the supervision of a doctor.

***Registered nurses (R.N.)*** may have 2, 3, or 4 years of education in a nursing school. In addition to performing bedside nursing duties, such as giving medicine, administering treatments, and educating patients, R.N.'s often hold supervisory and teaching positions in hospitals, long-term care facilities, and colleges. R.N.'s also work in doctors' offices, clinics, and community health agencies. Medicare does not cover private duty nursing. It helps pay for general nursing services by reimbursing hospitals, skilled nursing facilities, and home health agencies for part of the nurses' salaries.

***Registered dietitians (R.D.)*** provide nutritional care and dietary counseling. Most of them work in hospitals or doctors' offices, but some have private practices. R.D.'s complete a bachelor's degree and an internship (or an approved coordinated undergraduate program) and, in addition, pass an examination. Medicare generally will not pay for a dietitian's services. However, it does reimburse hospitals and skilled nursing facilities for a portion of dietitians' salaries.

***Physical therapists (P.T.)*** help people whose strength, ability to move, sensation, or range of motion is impaired. They may use exercise; heat, cold, or water therapy; or other treatments to control pain, strengthen muscles, and improve coordination. All P.T.'s complete a program leading to a bachelor's degree, and some of them receive further postgraduate training. Patients are usually referred by a doctor, and Medicare pays some of the costs of outpatient treatments. Physical therapy performed in a hospital or skilled nursing facility is covered by Medicare.

***Occupational therapists (O.T.)*** assist patients with handicaps to function more independently. They may provide exercise programs; heat, cold, and whirlpool treatments to relieve pain; and hand splints and adaptive equipment to improve function and independence. O.T.'s have a bachelor's degree plus 6 months of specialized training. The costs of occupational therapy will be paid in part by Medicare if the patient is referred as an outpatient by a doctor or in full if the patient is in a hospital or skilled nursing facility.

***Speech-language pathologists*** are concerned with speech and language problems while ***audiologists*** are interested in hearing disorders. Some specialists work in both areas. They test and evaluate patients, and they plan therapy to restore as much normal function as possible. Many speech-language pathologists work with stroke victims, those who have dementia, patients with diseases of the nervous system, and people who have had their vocal cords removed. Many audiologists work with older people whose hearing may be failing. They recommend hearing aids when needed and sometimes dispense them. Speech-language pathologists and audiologists have at least a master's degree. Most of them are licensed by the state in which they practice. Medicare generally will cover the services of speech-language pathologists and audiologists.

***Social workers*** in health care settings alert patients to community services which might be useful, arrange for counseling when necessary, and help patients and their families handle problems related to physical and mental illness and disability. Older people might be referred to social workers by various health providers or their local governments. A social worker's education may range from a bachelor's degree to a doctorate. Most of them have a master's degree (M.S.W.). Medicare does not cover services provided by social workers unless they work in a hospital setting.

## Dental Care

***Dentists (D.D.S. or D.M.D.)*** treat oral conditions such as gum disease and tooth decay. They do regular checkups, give routine dental and preventive care, fill cavities, remove teeth, provide dentures, and check for cancers in the mouth. Dentists can prescribe medication and perform oral surgery. A general dentist might refer patients to a specialist such as an oral surgeon, who does difficult tooth removals and surgery on the jaw; an endodontist, who is an expert on root canals; or a periodontist, who is especially knowledgeable about gum diseases. Medicare will not pay for any dental care except for surgery on the jaw or facial bones.

***Dental hygienists (R.D.H.)*** examine, clean, and polish the teeth. They also take X-rays and teach patients about proper dental care. Although hygienists' duties vary according to state law, they almost always work under the supervision of a dentist. Most hygienists have at least 2 years of formal training, and all are licensed by the state in which they practice. Medicare does not pay for their services.

***Dental assistants*** help dentists and dental hygienists in the dental office. They may process X-rays, prepare the patient for examination, schedule appointments, or assist the dentist while he or she works. Dental assistants may have some formal training or they may learn their responsibilities on the job. Their services are not covered by Medicare.

## Eye Care

***Ophthalmologists (M.D.)*** are M.D.'s who specialize in the diagnosis and treatment of diseases of the eye. They also prescribe eyeglasses and contact lenses. Like other M.D.'s, ophthalmologists can prescribe drugs and perform surgery. They often treat older people who have glaucoma and cataracts. Medicare helps pay for all medically necessary surgery or treatment of eye diseases and for examinations and eyeglasses to correct vision after cataract surgery. But it will not pay for routine examinations, eyeglasses, or contact lenses.

***Optometrists (O.D.)*** have a bachelor's degree plus 3 years of training in a school of optometry. They are trained to prescribe, supply, and adjust eyeglasses and contact lenses. Although optometrists cannot prescribe drugs, in some states they are allowed to use certain drugs in their offices. An optometrist refers patients to an ophthalmologist for more complicated diagnosis or treatment, or for care requiring medication or surgery. Medicare pays for only a limited number of optometric services.

***Opticians*** fit, supply, and adjust eyeglasses and contact lenses which have been prescribed by an ophthalmologist or optometrist. They cannot examine or test the eyes, or prescribe glasses or drugs. Opticians are licensed in 22 states and may have formal training. Traditionally, however, most opticians learn their skills during on-the-job training.

## Muscle, Bone, and Foot Care

***Orthopedists (M.D. or D.O.)*** are surgeons who operate on and treat problems of

the bones, joints, muscles, ligaments, and tendons.

***Podiatrists (D.P.M.)*** diagnose, treat, and prevent diseases and injuries of the foot. They may do surgery, make devices to correct or prevent foot problems, provide toenail care, and prescribe certain drugs. A podiatrist is not licensed to treat diseases or injuries of any other part of the body. Podiatrists complete 4 years of professional school and, once they have been licensed, Medicare will cover the cost of their services except routine foot care. (However, routine foot care is covered if it is necessary because of diabetic complications.)

## Mental Health Care

***Psychiatrists (M.D.)*** are M.D.'s who treat people with mental and emotional difficulties. They can prescribe medication and counsel patients, as well as perform diagnostic tests to determine if there are physical problems. Medicare will pay for a portion of both inpatient and outpatient psychiatric costs.

Clinical ***psychologists (Ph.D.)*** are called "doctor" because they have a doctoral degree in psychology. They are not medical doctors, but they counsel people with mental and emotional problems. (Some clinical psychologists who have a master's degree, but not a Ph.D., also work with patients, but they do not use the title "doctor.") The services of a clinical psychologist are not covered by Medicare except when they are performed in connection with the services of an M.D. or a psychiatrist.

These are only a few of the health professionals who provide care to people of all ages. They are especially important to the elderly, some of whom require a great deal of medical attention. Ideally, all health professionals will work together to provide older people with care that is comprehensive, efficient, cost-effective, and compassionate.

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